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Boulton-Lewis, Gillian M. (2007) *Ageing and learning in Australia*. In: International Conference on Learning in Later Life, 9-11 May 2007, University of Strathclyde, Strathclyde, UK . (Unpublished)

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2009000568

AGEING AND LEARNING IN AUSTRALIA

Keynote presentation at the International Conference on Learning in Later Life

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This presentation is a summary of studies conducted by Purdie & Boulton-Lewis, 2003; Boulton-Lewis, Buys & Lovie-Kitchin, 2006; and Boulton-Lewis, Buys, Lovie-Kitchin, Barnett & David, 2007, focussing on aspects of ageing and learning in Australia.

The first study (2003) was a pilot project by interview and questionnaire with small samples.

The second and third papers resulted from analyses of the data from the Australian Active Ageing Project (Triple A). A selection of survey data (165 variables) with responses from 2645 people aged between 50-75 years was analysed, first for attitudes to learning and second for learning about technology.

The first study resulted in a questionnaire on ageing and learning and the identification of technology; health, safety and transportation; and leisure/hobby activities as the most important learning needs. The analyses of the Triple A data showed amongst other results that most of the respondents were interested in learning new things which varied according to age and gender.

Younger respondents wanted learn about new technology, activities and interests, holiday and travel, and money management. Older respondents were interested in political events, avoiding violence, and organising transport. Health, lack of transport and prior learning kept them from learning. More women than men were interested in learning generally but more men than women were interested in learning about computer technology

The results show that older people want to keep learning; their interests vary; and there is a need for recognition of their learning requirements and for programs which facilitate them.

I can't really generalise about ageing and learning in Australia but I can share with you the results of three studies that I have been involved with and written about (Purdie & Boulton-Lewis, 2003; Boulton-Lewis, Buys & Lovie-Kitchin, 2006; Boulton-Lewis, Buys, Lovie-Kitchin, Barnett & David, 2007) and the presentation at this conference.

I have researched learning across the lifespan from early childhood, through primary and secondary school, to university, the workplace and now older age (and even in palliative care). My major interest is in how, what, why and where people learn. Humans generally want to learn. Babies learn to walk and talk, and much more without much help. Young children are

intrinsically curious and keep on wanting to learn unless somehow the motivation is extinguished in the early school years or later. It seems from our research that older adults of all kinds are still interested and involved in learning when the conditions are favourable and if they are not suffering from any complicating medical problems. It is clear from research in the area that learning plays an important role in productive ageing.

My interest in older persons and learning developed from a discussion with a colleague while we were walking through a rainforest on a retreat back in 2001. I didn't think I was ageing then at 60 – I still don't want to admit it really – we were both talking about our older mothers who did not seem to want to learn about technology. My mother was 82 at the time and Nola's was a similar age. We thought that using a computer, e-mail, electronic banking and so on would improve their quality of life if they could be persuaded to embrace it. We both had experience in learning research and we decided to apply for a small grant from our university to find out what older adults thought about learning. We embarked on the research from which we published the results in 2003. It was a pilot project with two studies and small samples but we developed a questionnaire and found what we thought were some interesting results.

Generally the participants identified technology; health, safety and transportation; and leisure/hobby activities as their most important learning needs. The health learning needs related to dealing with health problems as they occurred and to their changing physical capacities. They were also concerned with personal and property safety and wanted to learn a range of hobby and leisure activities. Some wanted to learn things that they had never had the chance to do before (Learning to fly). Whilst the interview participants said they needed to learn about technology, when this was compared with the other issues about which they wanted to learn, this was low on the list of priorities; was an interesting paradox.

From the interview results and our reading we developed and implemented a questionnaire.

Using factor analysis we identified again three main learning needs;

1. technology
2. health, safety and transportation
3. and leisure/hobbies

Barriers to learning included external factors

1. health and physical ability
2. motivation and self confidence

Efficacy in learning depended on confidence with technology and general self efficacy in learning.

Slides 1, 2, 3, 4

Following this project we applied in 2003, with a group of researchers from the Faculties of Education, Health, Social Sciences and Humanities, and Built Environment and Engineering for Strategic Collaborative Grants in our university to investigate Productive/Active ageing. We were funded for four years and developed and administered a very large survey. The research was described as the Australian Active Ageing Project (Triple A) – slide 5. The 2006 and 2007 papers were written from analysis of some of the data from this project and more are in progress including an analysis of women and violence, a full description of the method, and perhaps a shorter questionnaire.

The survey contained (178 items, later analysed as 165 variables because some were skipped)

The survey covered issues as follows: paid and voluntary work (14), learning (33), social (11), spiritual (9), emotional (24), health, vision and home (50), life events (9), and demographics (14). Learning, social, spiritual, emotional, health, vision, home, and life event items were developed from existing surveys with permission (more details from me). ***The learning questions (derived from Purdie & Boulton-Lewis, 2003) contained 8 items about learning interests, 7 about what people needed to learn, 7 about what they wanted to learn, and 11 items concerned with obstacles to learning.*** Other sections were developed by the research team. An open question at the end of the survey asked respondents to describe what being actively engaged in life meant to them.

A random sample of 6000 people aged 50 - 75+ years, Australia wide, selected by a large Australian seniors' organisation, received the postal survey (further details slide 7). The largest number of respondents was aged

between 50-65 years and they were generally quite well off financially. Data for the 2645 respondents who responded were analysed.

Most of the respondents were interested in learning new things including new technology, new activities and those for leisure and interest.

There was some difference between the interest of younger and older respondents;

Younger respondents (50 - 65) were more interested in keeping up to date with technology, and in new activities, new interests, holiday and travel, and managing money.

Older respondents (older than 74) were interested in political events, avoiding violence, and organising transport. They also said that health, lack of transport and prior learning kept them from learning new things.
(Slide 8)

An individual's health and attitude to learning were most important in active ageing but we also found that the following factors influenced learning generally.

1. being **female** is significant in wanting to learn, needing to learn, engagement with learning and the need for independence/protection
2. **good physical health** is significant in wanting to learn and engagement with learning and poor health is an obstacle to learning
3. being **younger** is significant in wanting to learn, needing to learn and engagement with learning
4. being **regional** is significant in wanting to learn, needing to learn and engagement with learning
5. being a **high income earner** is significant in wanting to learn
6. a **low income** is an **obstacle** and influences the need for protection/independence
7. Finally **formal (prior) education** is important in engagement with learning, and being less formally educated constitutes an obstacle

(Slide 9)

Ageing, learning and computer technology

A search of the literature in the area indicated that;

A significant phenomenon of the 21st century is the rapid increase in the use of technology. Communication technologies have potential to minimize social isolation and improve quality of life. We believe that older adults need the ability to use new technologies to support and improve their quality of life and participation in society. Retirees are the group most likely to be without an Internet connection; 63% were unconnected compared with 29% of all groups that were not connected (Hellwig, 2000). Some older people are positive about computers, while others respond negatively to design and operational features. Age-related impairments to vision, hearing and memory, and mobility loss, contribute to lack of confidence and difficulty in orientation and absorption of information.

We analysed the AAA data a second time to focus specifically on learning about computer technology.

Slides 10 – 17 computer technology

Regression analysis showed that:

1. Those who **keep up to date** with technology are more likely to be **men**, interested in learning and doing new things, in current affairs and their families - hence mentally engaged with issues of family and wider social life, and proactive in learning
2. Those **who need to keep up to date** make an effort to learn new things and activities, want to fulfil personal goals, feel they have more to do in life - hence are engaged with the future, and with ways to enable that to continue
3. Those who **want to learn to keep up to date** like to learn and try new things and new activities, want to learn to discourage violence, are confident, do not let things get them down, and are better educated.

The open statements contained mentions of:

1. using technology for the purposes of communication, learning, family links, keeping up to date, enjoyment, staying mentally alert and just using the computer for a range of reasons at home or at work

2. specific analyses of responses by the terms computers (39), technology (26), e-mail (8) and learning about technology (22/36 female), give more understanding of how and why people want to use technology.

In summary the older people who engage with technology are likely to;

1. be interested in, and enjoy learning new things and activities
2. have an interest in current affairs and keeping up to date
3. make an effort, have personal goals, feel there is more to do in life
4. have confidence and do not let things get them down
5. want to learn to discourage violence
6. maintain communication with families
7. be younger, better educated and male

Some concluding recommendations

1. Models for the promotion of access to computer technology are being pioneered by entrepreneurs and communities in the USA and Australia and no doubt elsewhere
2. Computer and software company programs and peer teaching are two such activities
3. Intergenerational learning has been successful with children and adolescents helping older people to master the necessary skills
4. Seniors' organisations such as ASCCA, COTA, U3A, and SeniorNet actively promote computer tuition by older people for older people with a focus on complete beginners who may be fearful of the technology
5. It seems from our results that such programs are particularly important for women who generally want to learn, want to learn about technology, are not as likely currently to be using technology, and will need it in the future
6. Access to computers for people with lower incomes also needs to be addressed
7. information about options for learning by older people needs to be readily available
8. for example:
 - U3A, Elderhostels, seniors groups
 - various clubs and groups

- local council activities
 - online activities
 - active involvement in ageing research
 - opportunities to share skills and knowledge with peers and younger people
9. attitudes to and opportunities for older people to learn need to be examined
 10. older people have the right to keep learning and living
 11. such learning might save governments money because will allow
 12. older people to manage their own lives better

We have also analysed the results for women and violence and found that those on lower incomes said that they wanted and needed to learn to discourage violence. This need increases with age. The results highlight the importance of understanding older women's fears and providing learning opportunities to improve safety and social engagement.

Finally we applied for an Australian Research Council grant to research active ageing for people with a lifelong learning disability. I presented an analysis of their conceptions of ageing and engagement with learning yesterday. The most interesting aspect of that analysis was that both people who did not know they were ageing and those who understood the phenomenon quite well were actively engaged in learning whereas those who only had limited knowledge of ageing were not very active.

Publications

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